

## **On the Architecture of Modernity**

Reason, Illusion and Coherence

*By Tala Vaziri*

In the sprawling landscape of human history, the emergence of modernity stands as both a triumph of reason and an enigma that refuses to be neatly tied to any singular origin. The modern era, like an art form in its own right, continually shifts and evolves, making it impossible to pinpoint a definitive beginning or end. Yet, it remains unmistakably a product of reason's liberation—a liberation that began not merely as intellectual curiosity, but as a revolution in thought and perception. Architecture, as both a product and a driver of modernity, finds itself enmeshed in this ongoing search for meaning, truth, and identity.

Modernity, derived from the Latin *modo*, meaning "just now," signifies a temporal state—one that deliberately breaks from the past, casting aside old ideals and norms. As we approach the modern, we confront a paradox: it is a present that never ceases to dissolve itself into something new, yet it insists on its singularity. The notion that the past holds any claim to eternal truth is one we no longer entertain. Modernity—whether in the arts, in science, or in architecture—emerges out of a tension between continuity and rupture, between history and its erasure.

### *Knowledge and Materiality*

In architecture, this tension is particularly acute. The lineage of classical architecture, which has long stood as the pillar of aesthetic and philosophical inquiry, seems at odds with the demands of modernity. How does one reconcile the grandeur of ancient forms with the promise of progress, the "open horizon" of growing knowledge that insists upon continuous reinvention? Modernity, after all, is not simply the pursuit of new styles or novel technologies—it is a way of thinking, a mode of understanding the world through the lens of reason and material transformation. It is about seeing the built environment not as a static expression of tradition, but as a dynamic, evolving dialogue with the present moment.

It is in this context that we find architecture as the ultimate manifestation of modernity's paradox. Where once architects were bound by the constraints of classical forms—columns, arches, proportions—the modern architect, liberated by the rationality of science and technology, seeks to create structures that transcend the past. Yet, as in art, this liberation is not without its own set of challenges. The tension between progress and tradition is never fully resolved. The belief that modern architecture must eschew the classical for something entirely new leads us down a precarious path, where the core of architecture as a human endeavor risks becoming detached. The aesthetic ideals that once defined earlier eras have gradually become disconnected from the lived realities of those who inhabit the spaces we create.

And yet, there is beauty in this ongoing rupture. The essence of modernity is not in the rejection of history, but in its continual reinterpretation. The architect, like the philosopher, does not simply replicate the past but reimagines it, recontextualizing ancient forms and ideals in the light of contemporary understanding. Architecture, like knowledge itself, accumulates over time, and the design of today is the result of a long history of intellectual and artistic struggle.

### *The Paradox of Modern Identity - Art, Technology, and the Search for Meaning*

At the heart of modernity lies an intrinsic paradox—the quest for coherence amid fragmentation. The search for some form of order in a world increasingly defined by complexity and specialization is not merely a philosophical endeavor; it is the very pulse of architectural design. In modern art, as in architecture, the rejection of a single, unified ideal has given rise to a multitude of voices, each claiming its place in the cacophony of the modern world. Yet, within this dissonance, there is a deep longing for synthesis—a desire for a reconciliation that transcends the fragmented nature of contemporary existence.

Modern art, from its earliest days, has been driven by a desire to express the complexities of the human experience. In this context, architecture cannot remain neutral. It must engage with the shifting landscape of human thought and aspiration. The modern architect navigates the intersection of reason and emotion, logic and intuition, geometry and organic form. The building is not merely a shelter from the elements; it is a manifestation of our collective search for meaning, a place where the mind and the body converge.

This search for coherence is what makes modern architecture so compelling. It is not merely about aesthetics or technology; it is about the creation of spaces that speak to the very essence of what it means to be human in a world that seems increasingly fragmented. Just as the modern artist uses the tools of their craft to explore the boundaries of perception and experience, the architect uses the materials of the built world to explore the limits of possibility, creating spaces that are at once rational and poetic.

### *Dreams, Perception, and the Unseen*

Modernity, despite its strong foundation in reason and intellect, cannot fully disregard the irrational, the unconscious, and the unseen. In dreams, we encounter a version of reality that eludes strict rationalization, where deeper aspects of the self—desires, fears, and yearnings—reveal themselves, shaping our perception of the world in ways that go beyond logic. Similarly, architecture must recognize the boundaries of pure rationality and consider the mysterious, the intangible, and the sublime, which coexist alongside the measurable and the functional. In this way, architecture becomes a more layered endeavor, where reason and emotion, the known and the unknown, to be woven together to respond to the complexity of human experience.

The modern architect, in this context, is not merely a master of technology and form but also a seeker of deeper meaning within the spaces they shape. As Plotinus suggested, the spirit does not passively see the world; it strives to engage with it, to understand its complexities and find connection on a more fundamental level. Architecture, in its most transcendent form, is not simply an act of imposing order on chaos but a means of crafting environments where the human spirit can reflect, confront its own depths, and form a more intimate relationship with the world around it. These spaces become sites of dialogue—between the material and the immaterial, the self and the external—allowing for moments of self-realization and a richer sense of belonging.

This search for meaning is, yet never fully realized. Like the modern artist, the architect is forever in search of an ideal that remains just out of reach. The tension between the known and the unknown, between reason and mystery, between form and formlessness, is what makes modern architecture so endlessly fascinating. It is a search that mirrors the very nature of modernity itself—a quest that is always in motion, always evolving, always seeking.

In the end, modern architecture is not a rejection of the past, but a continual engagement with it. It is not merely about creating new forms or using new materials; it is about forging a deeper connection with the present moment, to the very essence of human existence in a context shaped by change and complexity. Architecture, like modernity itself, is a journey—a search for meaning, coherence, and truth that is never fully realized, but always unfolding. And in this search, the architect remains both the creator and the observer, caught in the delicate tension between reason and the ineffable, between knowledge and mystery, between the visible and the unseen.